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IDOSRJCAS10200

IDOSR JOURNAL OF COMPUTER AND APPLIED SCIENCES 10(2):1-7, 2025.

<https://doi.org/10.59298/JCAS/2025/1021700>

Engineering Smart Orthotics: Improving Mobility and Comfort

Kabiga Chelule Kwemoi

Faculty of Engineering Kampala International University Uganda

ABSTRACT

Recent advances in wearable technology, biomechanics, and material science have revolutionized the field of orthotics, giving rise to smart orthotic devices that dynamically adapt to user needs. This paper examines the evolution of orthotic technology, from historical devices to modern intelligent systems, and highlights how interdisciplinary engineering efforts are reshaping mobility aids. Smart orthotics, which incorporate sensors, actuators, adaptive materials, and artificial intelligence, offer real-time feedback and personalized support. These innovations improve both mobility and comfort for individuals with a range of physical impairments. The integration of user-centered design principles, advanced fabrication techniques like 3D printing, and clinical insights ensures that these devices are not only functional but also accessible and ergonomic. Furthermore, the paper discusses the clinical applications, current design considerations, and future directions of smart orthotics, emphasizing their potential to transform rehabilitation and long-term care. Ultimately, this research underlines the importance of engineering innovation in fostering inclusive and sustainable solutions for mobility enhancement.

Keywords: Smart orthotics, mobility enhancement, wearable technology, biomechanics, 3D printing, user-centered design, rehabilitation engineering.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, advancements in technology have transformed orthotics, enhancing mobility and comfort for those in need. Traditionally designed to support musculoskeletal deformities, orthotics now integrate smart technologies due to a growing understanding of biomechanics and material science. This shift introduces devices offering dynamic, personalized support that adapts to users' movements. The development of smart orthotics combines insights from engineering, medical sciences, and artificial intelligence, utilizing wearable sensors for real-time data analysis. This data-driven method allows for precise evaluations, enabling devices to automatically adjust support and comfort levels. Innovations in material science ensure these devices are lightweight and comfortable for prolonged use. Furthermore, custom fabrication techniques like 3D printing have significantly reduced production times, facilitating tailored solutions for individual needs. As smart orthotics evolve, they promise to transform rehabilitation and mobility assistance, alleviating healthcare burdens by decreasing long-term dependence on medical interventions. This technology also encourages discussions about accessibility and health equity, making solutions available to diverse populations. The journey towards smart orthotics advances individual care and promotes a more inclusive future in mobility assistance [1, 2].

Background on Orthotics

Orthotics have played a crucial role in managing mobility impairments for centuries. From simple wooden braces and leather straps, these devices have evolved significantly. Originally providing basic support for those with disabilities or injuries, their historical transformation reflects advancements in medical and material sciences. Modern orthotic design features specialization and integration with new technologies, offering personalized solutions to meet individual biomechanical needs. Ancient civilizations first utilized primitive orthotics, establishing foundational concepts still relevant today. Industrialization led to the use of metals and plastics, enhancing durability and flexibility. Today, orthotic devices range from custom insoles to complex spinal devices, showcasing advanced anatomical understanding. Recent technological advancements have notably influenced orthotic design, focusing on comfort and function.

Innovations such as additive manufacturing allow for precise, custom orthotic fabrication, improving fit and decreasing production time and costs. Sensor integration enables real-time monitoring and adjustments for optimal performance. These developments have increased the capability and accessibility of orthotics, enhancing mobility and independence. As technology progresses, the future of orthotics is poised to redefine possibilities, emphasizing the partnership between biomechanics and innovation in improving mobility and quality of life [3, 4].

History of Orthotic Devices

Orthotic devices have a long history, dating back to ancient civilizations where artisans used wood and leather to create supports for bodily functions. Early medical texts record the use of splints and braces, showcasing attempts to provide limb stability and relieve discomfort. The Middle Ages saw significant advancements as blacksmiths crafted more durable metal devices, driven by improved anatomical understanding and collaboration between medical professionals and craftsmen. The Renaissance period furthered this development with innovations like adjustable tension-spring mechanisms for personalized treatment. The 20th century, influenced by the industrial revolution, introduced new materials and mass production, enhancing accessibility and efficiency. Plastics and lightweight metals replaced bulkier materials, improving comfort and functionality, while specialized fields like pediatric orthotics emerged. Recent advances in computation and materials science have led to the creation of sophisticated, smart orthotic devices that optimize mobility and comfort [5, 6].

Types of Orthotics

Orthotics are specialized devices designed to align, support, or improve the function of various parts of the body, predominantly the limbs and spine. Within the realm of orthotics, various types cater to distinct anatomical and physiological needs. Understanding these categories is crucial for tailoring interventions that enhance mobility and comfort for individuals with musculoskeletal challenges. Commonly, orthotics are classified based on the part of the body they serve or the specific functional purpose they fulfill. Foot orthotics represent one of the most prevalent types and are often used to correct biomechanical foot issues, redistribute pressure, and improve overall gait. These devices, which range from simple insoles to custom-designed footwear inserts, effectively alleviate conditions such as plantar fasciitis, flat feet, and arthritis. Their design, material, and structural complexity vary according to the specific needs of the user, integrating supportive components that enhance both stability and comfort. Similarly, ankle-foot orthotics aim to stabilize the ankle and foot, assisting individuals with weakened muscles or nerve impairments, notably prevalent in those with cerebral palsy or stroke-related conditions. Beyond the lower body, knee orthotics provide crucial support and alignment for individuals managing ligament injuries or osteoarthritis. These can range from soft wraps to rigid devices designed to control movement and alleviate pain by ensuring proper joint function. Upper limb orthotics, encompassing devices like wrist splints and full-arm braces, are engineered to assist with mobility limitations induced by injuries, neurological conditions, or repetitive strain disorders. Through careful design, these orthotics enable individuals to perform daily tasks, mitigating discomfort and supporting rehabilitation. Spinal orthotics complete the landscape of orthotic devices, offering support and correcting deformities in the spinal column. Often utilized for conditions like scoliosis or spinal fractures, these devices range from simple elastic braces to complex body jackets that provide robust support and alignment. With advances in materials and engineering, spinal orthotics continue to evolve, promising greater comfort and efficacy. Understanding the variety and functionality of these orthotic types is essential in engineering smart orthotics that drive forward the goal of improved mobility and comfort across diverse patient populations [7, 8].

Current Trends in Orthotic Design

In recent years, orthotic design has undergone significant advancements driven by technological innovations and a better understanding of biomechanics. A prominent trend is the integration of smart technology into orthotic devices, allowing them to provide real-time feedback and adapt to the user's needs. These smart orthotics are equipped with sensors that monitor physiological parameters such as pressure distribution or gait patterns, enabling the device to make instant adjustments to enhance comfort and performance. This capability is particularly beneficial for individuals with complex mobility impairments, as it offers a more personalized approach to treatment. Moreover, the use of advanced materials in orthotic construction is revolutionizing the field. Lightweight, durable, and often biodegradable materials have replaced traditional options, providing improved performance and sustainability. These materials conform more naturally to the body's structure, resulting in enhanced comfort and ease of use. Additionally, the advent of additive manufacturing has transformed the production of orthotic devices. This technology allows for customized designs that can be tailored to meet the unique anatomical needs of each patient, while also reducing production costs and time. The flexibility

provided by 3D printing facilitates the rapid prototyping of novel designs, encouraging innovation and rapid iteration. The focus on aesthetic appeal has also gained momentum as users seek orthotic solutions that are not only functional but stylish. As orthotic devices become a visible part of daily life, the fusion of fashion with functionality is increasingly important. Designers are collaborating with medical experts to create orthotics that seamlessly integrate into various lifestyles while maintaining essential support. In conclusion, the current trends in orthotic design emphasize a multidisciplinary approach, merging technology, materials science, and aesthetics to improve mobility and comfort for users. These developments reflect broader themes in the field of orthotics, aligning with the exploration of how engineering innovations enhance the effectiveness and appeal of orthotic devices [9, 10].

Smart Technology in Orthotics

Smart technology has transformed orthotics, improving device functionality and adaptability to enhance mobility and comfort. By incorporating sensors, actuators, lightweight materials, and advanced microprocessors, modern orthotic systems have evolved from passive supports to dynamic tools that adapt to user needs in real-time. This innovation is crucial for individuals with disabilities, injuries, or chronic conditions requiring ongoing support. For example, smart orthotics with embedded sensors track biomechanical metrics like gait patterns and joint angles, supplying essential data for tailored interventions. This diagnostic ability empowers healthcare providers to fine-tune device settings and improve patient outcomes to levels previously unattainable with traditional orthotics. Actuation systems further boost smart orthotics' capabilities, offering active assistance rather than mere stabilization. Powered by compact motors or electroactive polymers, these systems can adjust in real-time during movement, easing strain when walking or enhancing control for those with impaired motor function. Paired with machine learning, these actuators can anticipate user intentions, ensuring smooth transitions between activities, like climbing stairs or navigating uneven surfaces. Advanced communication technologies enable ongoing performance monitoring through apps or platforms, giving users access to detailed reports and tracking. Smart technologies have also revolutionized ergonomic design, utilizing materials such as carbon fiber composites and thermoplastics combined with pressure sensors, resulting in durable, lightweight devices that accommodate anatomical variations. These advancements enhance comfort and significantly reduce the likelihood of pressure sores or skin irritation. Additionally, smart orthotics with soft robotics or adaptive cushioning replicate natural joint movement, allowing fluid motion while maintaining proper biomechanics. Collectively, these technological advancements signify a shift towards more intuitive and responsive orthotic solutions for diverse user needs [10, 11].

Design Considerations

Designing smart orthotics requires a balance of form, function, and user-centered innovation, starting with an understanding of the biomechanical challenges of the target population. While orthotics enhance mobility and alleviate discomfort, smart orthotics integrate technologies that respond dynamically to user needs. Key design considerations include ensuring compatibility between the mechanical structure and advanced electronic components like sensors, microprocessors, and actuators, all while maintaining lightweight and ergonomic properties. This alignment provides real-time adaptability without compromising wearer comfort. Material selection is crucial, impacting durability, flexibility, and user comfort. Smart orthotics should use materials resistant to wear while remaining lightweight and hypoallergenic; commonly, thermoplastic polymers, carbon fiber composites, and elastomers are preferred for their favorable attributes. Additionally, integrating various sensors necessitates strategic placements to ensure effective signal transmission, as well as power supply considerations through energy-efficient options like low-power electronics, rechargeable batteries, or energy-harvesting solutions linked to user movement. Human factors engineering is vital for creating effective, non-intrusive orthotics. Customization and modularity allow adaptation to individual anatomy and physiological changes, with advancements in 3D scanning and printing enhancing precision in orthotic crafting. Personalization considers ease of use across varying technical literacy levels. Finally, designers must evaluate lifecycle aspects such as reliability, serviceability, and cost to ensure the creation of solutions that are innovative yet accessible and sustainable. Thoughtful design choices are essential in engineering smart orthotics that improve lives and meet modern mobility demands [12, 13].

Mobility Enhancement Features

Mobility enhancement features in smart orthotics are transforming assistive technology, greatly improving the lives of those with mobility challenges. These features integrate seamlessly with human biomechanics, employing advanced materials and technologies to promote natural movement and optimal support. Key innovations include adaptive control systems, real-time feedback mechanisms, and personalized adjustments that significantly boost user mobility, stability, and comfort. Adaptive control systems use sophisticated algorithms to process sensor data and adapt to different terrains and movement

patterns. By continuously monitoring gait, weight distribution, and joint angles, these systems adjust the orthotic's support and alignment, ensuring effective assistance tailored to individual needs. This adaptability allows for smoother ambulation transitions, minimizing energy expenditure and reducing muscle fatigue. Additionally, smart materials enhance flexibility and support by allowing the orthotic structure to respond to changes. Real-time feedback is essential for achieving optimal mobility outcomes. Sensors and wearable technology enable immediate information through apps or device interfaces, helping users adjust movements for improved performance and rehabilitation. These devices can connect with healthcare providers, allowing for remote monitoring and personalized training modifications. The combination of advanced materials, intelligent control systems, and feedback mechanisms results in orthotic solutions that enhance mobility and empower users to live more independent and active lives [14, 15].

Comfort Improvement Strategies

Enhancing the comfort of orthotic devices is pivotal for user adherence and overall mobility. Comfort encompasses not just the physical sensation of the device but also psychological reassurance, ease of use, and adaptability to various activities. A key strategy involves innovative materials like memory foam or thermoplastic elastomers, which reduce pressure points and evenly distribute forces across the body. These materials provide cushioning that adapts to the wearer's contours and movements. Additionally, advancements in moisture-wicking and breathable textiles maintain skin health, preventing irritation and promoting prolonged wear. Fit is another cornerstone of comfort improvement. Utilizing 3D scanning and modeling technologies allows for custom orthotic devices tailored to individual anatomy, creating a fit akin to a second skin. This precision enhances comfort while optimizing functionality, improving user outcomes. Enhanced adjustability within designs augments comfort by enabling personalization of fit for situational needs, accommodating swelling or footwear changes. User-centric design is crucial, with feedback and trials shaping the product. This leads to innovative features like intuitive fastening systems that simplify wear, promoting independence and reducing frustration. Moreover, incorporating aesthetic elements helps orthotics blend into daily attire, mitigating stigma and enhancing psychological comfort. Integrating technology, such as sensors for real-time feedback on gait and pressure, empowers users to adjust and optimize orthotic use proactively. By combining advanced materials, bespoke fits, and user engagement, modern orthotic design showcases a commitment to comfort for diverse populations [16, 17].

Clinical Applications

Clinical applications of smart orthotics are transforming mobility and comfort by merging engineering innovations with medical expertise. These advanced devices cater to various orthotic needs, utilizing technology for personalized and responsive support across diverse patient populations. They enhance rehabilitation and mobility for those with musculoskeletal disorders, neurological conditions, or injuries, significantly improving quality of life. Smart materials and sensors allow real-time monitoring and adjustments, crucial in rehabilitation settings. By tracking gait patterns or weight distribution, these devices offer data-driven insights for clinicians to customize treatment protocols, facilitating precise interventions that expedite recovery and improve mobility outcomes. In pediatric and geriatric care, adaptability and feedback are vital; these devices enable ongoing refinement of therapeutic strategies, ensuring effectiveness as patients age or grow. Additionally, smart orthotics aid in managing chronic conditions like arthritis or diabetic neuropathy by alleviating pain and preventing complications. They adapt to users' specific needs, enhancing daily functionality while maintaining comfort. Their connectivity to digital platforms opens telemedicine avenues, enabling remote expert adjustments and consultations. This fosters a collaborative healthcare approach among patients, clinicians, and technology for optimal outcomes. As smart orthotic technology advances, clinical applications will broaden, leading to even more personalized and effective care solutions [18, 19].

User Experience and Feedback

User experience and feedback serve as vital components in the development and refinement of smart orthotics, providing engineers and designers with essential insights into the practical application and user satisfaction of the devices. Understanding the lived experiences of individuals who utilize these orthotic solutions can lead to significant improvements in both mobility and comfort. The integration of user feedback into the design process ensures that smart orthotics are not only technologically advanced but also aligned with the real-world needs and preferences of their users. Feedback mechanisms, such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups, are employed to gather data on user experience, which encompasses aspects like ease of use, comfort, functionality, and the impact on daily activities. This data plays a crucial role in the iterative design process, enabling creators to identify and address common pain points, customize features to accommodate user-specific requirements, and enhance overall user

satisfaction. For instance, feedback highlighting discomfort due to material or fit can lead to adjustments in design or choice of materials, while insights regarding improved mobility might prompt the integration of advanced sensors or adaptive technologies. Moreover, involving users in the development process contributes to a sense of ownership and empowerment among individuals, potentially leading to increased compliance and better health outcomes. User-centred design, which prioritizes the experiences and needs of the individuals, can result in orthotic devices that are intuitively designed for ease of movement and optimal support. By regularly incorporating user feedback, manufacturers can also stay attuned to emerging trends and technological advancements, ensuring that their products remain relevant and competitive in a rapidly evolving market. Ultimately, the symbiotic relationship between user experience and design innovation catalyzes creating smart orthotics that enhance the quality of life for those who rely on them [20, 21].

Challenges and Limitations

In enhancing mobility and comfort via smart orthotics, challenges arise that need focus from researchers, designers, and clinicians. A key issue is integrating advanced technologies into compact, wearable designs while maintaining user comfort and practicality, which presents engineering hurdles. Components like sensors and microprocessors must be lightweight to not impede natural movements and durable for long-term use, prompting innovations in material science and energy storage. Customization poses another challenge; devices must fit the unique physiological needs of users and adapt as they change, especially for children or those with progressive conditions. This need for personalized solutions raises concerns about production scalability and costs. Advanced manufacturing techniques, including 3D printing and modular design, are investigated to address these issues, but bring complexities like quality assurance and regulatory compliance. Additionally, implementing smart orthotics faces regulatory and accessibility hurdles. Balancing the need to meet stringent medical regulations with affordability is crucial, as regulatory frameworks often lag behind technological advancements, delaying market introductions. The digital divide also poses a risk, with limited access to such devices in low-resource settings. Addressing these challenges requires collaboration among technologists, policymakers, and healthcare providers to promote innovation and inclusivity [22, 23].

Future Directions

The realm of smart orthotics is advancing rapidly, driven by innovations in materials, artificial intelligence, and interconnectivity. As we look toward future directions, the emphasis will likely be on enhancing personalization and integration, tailoring orthotic devices not only to the specific anatomical and mechanical needs of individuals but also their lifestyle and environmental interactions. This paradigm shift from static design to dynamic adaptability is facilitated by the confluence of data analytics and sensor technology, allowing continuous monitoring and responsive adaptation. Elevated comfort and improved mobility are expected outcomes, but the broader vision encompasses a holistic approach to personal health management, integrating smart orthotics into comprehensive health ecosystems. In the coming years, we anticipate an expansion in materials science, yielding smarter, more durable materials that offer improved functionality while remaining lightweight and flexible. Advances in nanotechnology may open new avenues for embedding sensors directly into the fabric of orthotic devices, enhancing real-time feedback and adaptive control. Furthermore, the integration of artificial intelligence promises not only to fine-tune device operation but to predict potential issues, offering preemptive modifications to avert discomfort or injury. Machine learning algorithms will likely play pivotal roles in processing complex datasets, gleaning insights to optimize wearability and therapeutic effectiveness. Collaboration across disciplines will be crucial, with engineers working alongside medical professionals and data scientists. This interdisciplinary approach must also navigate ethical considerations, particularly regarding data privacy and the reliability of autonomous health recommendations. Meanwhile, accessibility remains a critical focus, ensuring these advances benefit diverse populations and do not widen the gap between those who can afford cutting-edge technologies and those who cannot. In essence, the future of smart orthotics is characterized by innovation and collaboration, aiming not merely to enhance mobility and comfort but to reshape how individuals engage with their health devices continuously and intuitively [24, 25].

CONCLUSION

Smart orthotics represent a paradigm shift in assistive technology, transforming passive supports into intelligent, adaptive systems that significantly enhance mobility, comfort, and independence. By integrating biomechanics, materials science, electronics, and artificial intelligence, these devices are tailored to the physiological and lifestyle needs of users. Innovations such as real-time sensor feedback, adaptive actuation, ergonomic design, and personalized fabrication through 3D printing are central to this transformation. As clinical applications expand and costs decrease, smart orthotics are becoming

more accessible, offering not just improved therapeutic outcomes but also promoting health equity. The continued evolution of smart orthotic technology will depend on interdisciplinary collaboration, user-centered innovation, and a commitment to making advanced mobility solutions available to diverse populations. Ultimately, engineering smart orthotics is not only a technical endeavor but also a step toward a more inclusive and responsive healthcare system.

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CITE AS: Kabiga Chelule Kwemoi (2025). Engineering Smart Orthotics: Improving Mobility and Comfort. IDOSR JOURNAL OF COMPUTER AND APPLIED SCIENCES 10(2):1-7. <https://doi.org/10.59298/JCAS/2025/1021700>